

Laurel Valley Sugar Plantation: Corn Crib
2 miles south of Thibodaux on State Route 308
Thibodaux
Lafourche Parish
Louisiana

HAER No. LA-1D

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HAER Laurel Valley Project
Summer 1978

Name: Laurel Valley Corn Crib (Corn House)

Location: Laurel Valley Plantation
State Route 2 Box K526 (off La. Highway 308)
Thibodaux, Louisiana

Date of Construction: c. 1900; hoisting assembly installed 1905

Present Owner: Laurel Valley Plantation, Inc.

Present Use: Storage shed for farm machinery

Significance: This is the most interesting livestock-agricultural building to survive at Laurel Valley due to the hoisting assembly in the structure which facilitated the storage of feed oorn. The Y-shaped track, loft, and carrier for this hoist remain.

Historian: John C. Rumm

Among the photographs of Laurel Valley Plantation which have survived to this day there exists a hazy dreamlike shot of a group of animals standing stiffly in front of a large barn. An erstwhile photographer from the early 1900's captured the scene, scrawling across the bottom of the picture the caption "Just simply live mules."

This remark hardly reflects the great importance of mules, and indeed of other livestock, on Louisiana plantations during the 19th and early 20th centuries. In many ways, domesticated animals served vital roles. Horses, oxen, cattle, pigs, goats, and sheep were to be found on most plantations, providing for the residents food, clothing, and transportation. The lowly mule played perhaps the most important roles on a sugar plantation. Before the advent of steam power for grinding sugar cane, mule teams were employed in turning the mill rollers. Planters used mules during the spring for plowing their fields, and again in the fall for hauling cart-loads of harvested cane to the mill.

It is easy to overlook barns, stables, and other such buildings among the scores of structures which remain at Laurel Valley. As a mid-nineteenth century visitor to a Louisiana sugar plantation observed, however,

the stables . . . together with the granary, sheds and a score or more of useful, but scarcely to be recollected structures, form, of themselves, a striking picture of prodigal abundance, and suggest the immense outlay of capital necessary to carry on a large sugar plantation with success. (1)

As an element of the overall plantation system, therefore, the livestock buildings which remain at Laurel Valley should be considered for their historical importance and significance.

The livestock support buildings form a complex which is situated to the north of the Laurel Valley Sugarhouse. A listing of the plantation buildings compiled in 1922 noted the livestock complex structures:

- Corn Grinder and Pump House	<u>\$</u> 200	
- Mule Hospital	75	
- Stables, Barn, Corn House, etc.	9000	(2)

An architectural historian described these buildings in 1975 as "wood frame construction on brick footings with vertical board siding and galvanized tin roofs. Some of the larger buildings have heavy timber framing."³

Corn Grinder and Pump House

Situated west of the mill-pond which lies north of the Sugarhouse, this building housed a grist mill for animal feed and a pump for the sugar factory water tower. A Fairbanks gasoline engine and corn grinder were installed in the building in 1904, and according to the Laurel Valley Diary, the unit ground 70 bbls. corn in 6 hours.⁴ In 1914 an Adams-Marseilles Corn Sheller and a #1 Foos Corn Mill replaced the earlier machinery.

The pump, a triplex unit manufactured by the Rumsey Company, had a 3½ inch suction and a 3 inch discharge. A Fairbanks 12 horsepower 8 x 16 horizontal center-crank gasoline engine drove the pump.

The pump furnished water to a 77 foot steel water tank tower of 24,000 gallons capacity, constructed by the A. Baldwin Company of New Orleans to provide water for emergency use.⁵ Hurricane Betsy toppled this tower when it struck the plantation in 1965.

Mule Hospital

This is a charming title for a mule stable. The mule barn, which was also collapsed by Hurricane Betsy, was the largest structure on the plantation apart from the Sugarhouse. Located northeast of the Sugarhouse, this large T-shaped barn remained in use until the 1930's. Reputedly it housed over 200 mules.

Stables, Barn, Corn House

Several livestock and agricultural buildings exist near the site of the former Mule Hospital. As enumerated in 1975, these include a large barn and several small farm utility buildings.⁶ Another large structure, probably formerly used as a stables, is located near the row of Creole houses which border the eastern mill-pond. This building presently houses field equipment.

Of all the agricultural buildings which survive at Laurel Valley, the most interesting one for the industrial historian is the Corn House or Corn Crib. The building houses a hoisting system for storing corn, consisting of a double track and corn car in the crib loft and a Y-shaped rail track sloping downward from the loft out of the north face of the structure.

The hoisting assembly was installed in 1905, but the corn crib

itself had been erected many years previously. An 1868 tenant lease agreement for sharecroppers on the plantation declared that

all other products raised by the tenant, excepting those raised in the garden and on lands which the tenant may lease separately for money, shall be divided in the proportion of two-thirds to the tenant and one-third to the Place delivered by the tenant at the crib of the Place near the Sugar House. (7)

An 1895 map of the plantation, prepared by Benson & Bell of New Orleans, showed a corn crib east of the location of the building that survives today. Other cribs and receptacles for agricultural products known to have existed at Laurel Valley include a crib constructed in 1904 for M.V. Champagne.⁸

J. Wilson Lepine sought a hoisting system to aid in storing corn in the main Corn Crib, and to this end he wrote the A. Baldwin & Company Machinery Company in New Orleans in 1905:

Herewith you will find sketch of the building. We would like for you to quote us prices on something that would suit us to store our corn on the second floor. We have a catalogue of the Loudon Machinery Co., and note that you are their agents. We think that with one of their hoists, a trolley, 60' rail and 30 rafter brackets we could rig up a box to hold 30 bbls. corn in shuck and when hoisted one man could move it forward or backward and dump it; this box will have to be placed on the outside end of the building. (9)

A few days later he wrote directly to the Loudon Machinery Company in Fairfield, Iowa, requesting them to

please ship at once to Laurel Valley Plantation 1 pair tackle blocks for 3/4" rope to lift and load suspended at any height, 60 ft. track and 1 trolley car for same, 30 rafter brackets to hang track. We want this outfit to store corn and strong enough to lift 3000 lbs. at one time. (10)

The operation of the hoisting system was simple. Mule wagons loaded with corn delivered their load up a small hill to the base of the track. The load was manually transferred to the carrier. The mule team, unhitched from the wagon and linked to a pulley, the other end of which was attached to the carrier, descended the hill and thus hoisted the carrier up the track. A switch in the track controlled the direction of the carrier to either of the two tracks in the loft. When the carrier rested upon one of the loft tracks, it could be moved back and forth across the track manually. The sides of the carrier were then raised to permit the load of corn to spill onto the pile of corn on the lower level.

The roof of the crib was galvanized in 1909, but ironically a hurricane struck a few days later and destroyed the building. Workers "hailed corn in stables" while the crib was being re-built.¹¹ Its roof was re-galvanized in 1924. A report on the plantation prepared in 1926 after Mr. Lepine's death, stated that

[the] last corn crop did prove good and there is enough feed in the crib to carry the mules until next corn crop inasmuch as the Laurel Valley plantation is equipped with a fairly good feed mill to provide mixed feed for the stocks. (12)

In the 1930's, however, the introduction of tractors and farm machinery diminished the need for mules and other livestock. It is perhaps ironic that the Corn Crib today serves as a storage shed for many of the modern agricultural implements which replaced the mule.

Notes

- 1 T. B. Thorpe, "Sugar and the Sugar Regions of Louisiana," Harper's New Monthly Magazine 7 (June - November 1853), p. 754.
- 2 "Laurel Valley Plant.," inventory of buildings in 1922 Laurel Valley Log, 30 September 1922.
- 3 John H. Stubbs, "Laurel Valley Village of Laurel Valley Plantation," (Thibodaux: American Revolution Bicentennial Committee, 1975), p. 15.
- 4 Laurel Valley Diary (n.a., but prepared by bookkeeper Sylvester Toups), 1904 (14 April). On 24 May it was noted in the Diary that this equipment had broken down since "the corn has too much shucks in it."
- 5 American Appraisal Company, "Appraisal of the Barker and Lepine Lafourche Crossing, Louisiana," (Milwaukee, 1909), n.p.
- 6 Stubbs, p. 7.
- 7 1868 Tenant Lease Agreement for Laurel Valley, prepared by Louis Bush, in Lafourche Parish Clerk of Court, "Joseph W. Tucker Succession Papers," No. 230 Probates (Thibodaux, Louisiana).
- 8 Laurel Valley Diary 1904 (3 October). The 1909 Diary noted that workers had moved the "corn house" belonging to Jules Orodgne, in the front of the plantation. (16 July)
- 9 Barker and Lepine to A. Baldwin & Company Machinery Department, New Orleans, in Laurel Valley Letter Book (June 1903 - August 1905).
- 10 Barker and Lepine to the Loudon Machinery Company, Fairfield, Iowa, 12 August 1905, in Laurel Valley Letter Book. The invoice for the outfit, received 23 August 1905, listed:

60 feet d.b. steel /double beam/	@ .10	\$6.00
30 hangers & brackets		2.88
1 mdse carrier		3.00
1 hoist #25		6.00
		<u>\$17.88</u>
- 11 Laurel Valley Diary 1909 (21 August).
- 12 [?] to Morris Le Compte, New Orleans, 28 February 1926.

Bibliography

I. Manuscript Collections:

Nicholls State University Library Archives, Thibodaux
Laurel Valley Letter Books
1922 Laurel Valley Log
Laurel Valley Diaries, 1903-1904, 1906-1916
Barker and Lepine business correspondences
Laurel Valley Plantation invoices and receipts
Photographs, appraisals

II. Legal Documents:

Lafourche Parish Courthouse, Thibodaux
Clerk of Courts, "Joseph W. Tucker Succession Papers,"
No. 230 Probates

III. Materials in the Possession of Private Individuals:

Mrs. J. W. Lepine, Thibodaux
Benson & Bell, "Topographical Map of Laurel Valley
Plantation Parish Lafourche," New Orleans, c. 1895

IV. Articles:

Thorpe, T.B., "Sugar and the Sugar Regions of Louisiana,"
Harper's New Monthly Magazine 7 (June - November 1853),
pp. 746 - 767.

V. Monographs on Laurel Valley:

Stubbs, John H., "Laurel Valley Village of Laurel Valley
Plantation," (Thibodaux: American Bicentennial Committee,
1975).

ADDENDUM TO
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